

St Francis of Assisi, Hull

Wembley Park Avenue, Hull, East Yorkshire



Part 1: Core data

1.1 Listed grade: *Not listed*

1.2 Conservation area: *No*

1.3 Architect: *Vincente Stienlet*

1.4 Date(s): *1996-7*

1.5 Date of visit: *10 October 2007*

1.6 Name of report author: *Nicholas Antram*

1.7 Name of parish priest and/or contact(s) made on site: *Rev Bill Surplus*

1.8 Associated buildings: *Presbytery*

1.9 Bibliographic references:

Middlesbrough Diocesan Yearbook 2007

Carson, Robert: *The First 100 Years – A History of the Diocese of Middlesbrough 1878-1978*

Three awards for Stienlet's Churches, article in *Church Building* September/October 1995

New churches by Stienlet, article in *Church Building* November/December 1996

A Little Gem for St Francis, article in *Church Building* September/October 1997

Part 2: Analysis

2.1 Statement of Importance

St Francis of Assisi is a well crafted building with good attention to detail and furnishings. A criterion for the design of the church was that it should be 'a gently unfolding building— a religious experience to touch the emotions'. This challenging brief has been impressively realised by Stienlet, especially with regard to the interior. A good contemporary Catholic church.

2.2 Historical background

The parish was established in 1973 with a temporary portakabin church. 'The parish priest lives in his caravan beside the chapel, building up a thriving community' according to Robert Carson, writing in 1978. Not until 1996-7 was the parish able to build a permanent church. It was commissioned by Father Michael Dunn after he saw Stienlet's church of the same name in Sheffield. Vincente Stienlet is the third generation of an architectural practice founded in North Shields in 1904 by Pascal Stienlet. All three generations have designed Catholic churches and the present Vincente (his father bore the same name) designed his first church, St Oswald's South Shields, in 1965. He has gone on to design many more, a number winning architectural awards.

2.3 Setting

St Francis' church is set at a splayed junction in a 1960s and later suburban area of northeast Hull, an area with a mix of tower blocks and low scale housing generally well spaced out between grassed areas with trees. The church site is flat and featureless and stands facing an informal Green. The church itself is set within a grassed plot enclosed by high railings, with presbytery and a car park to the north. It is not prominent in the townscape and is set apart only by its unusual form of polygonal plan and an irregular pyramidal roof.

2.4 Description of the building and its principal fittings and furnishings

A striking feature of the church is its plan, the worship space a hexagon with one side broken and leading into a wing containing the narthex and ancillary accommodation and linking to the pre-existing presbytery. The hexagon is also extruded to the north to provide a meeting room which extends into the narthex wing. This produces a complex roof geometry, appearing pyramidal from the south but the pyramid broken by one plane continuing up and providing a glazed elevation and with a stainless steel cross at the highest point over the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Otherwise the interior of the worship space is lit by vertical slit windows from floor to eaves. The north elevation is dominated by the roof, which here becomes somewhat awkward, sweeping down to a horizontal band of windows lighting the meeting room. The main roof also sweeps down to form a canopy to the entrance, the corner rather unconvincingly supported on a thin column.

The exterior is clad in yellow brick and the roof in grey slate. The yellow brick is carried through as banding between the blockwork walls. Narthex corridor with a run of nine stained glass windows by Cate Watkinson on themes from St Francis' 'Canticles of the Sun'. Toilets, kitchens etc are accommodated on the left and there is a spiral staircase to the upper floor meeting rooms etc engagingly expressed in a cylindrical enclosure with a window looking through to the stair from the narthex.

The main worship area, a single-cell space, is entered with a sense of surprise as there is not sign of the altar and the lighting is subdued. The first object encountered is the large cylindrical stone font worked by Fred Watson from a block of granite from West Hartlepool dock wall. Immediately adjoining is the Blessed Sacrament chapel, fully glazed between chapel and church and with a strikingly original tabernacle.

The main space is tent like with low perimeter aisles with pilotis supporting the main roof. Curved seating is arranged in a semi circle, encircling the stone altar of dramatic cubic form. Lighting around the perimeter is subdued but the area between the altar and the Blessed Sacrament chapel is bathed in light from the large high-level window opposite the organ which is set on a gallery under which the church was entered. Raised on a step behind the altar a fixed ambo and chair of presidency. The step is contiguous with the plinth of the Blessed Sacrament chapel. In one corner, V-shaped and hidden behind a wall is the Lady Chapel with a statue of the Annunciation by Fenwick Lawson.